

Illegal Tender: Sustaining Communitas and the Social Gospel in Musical Film

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Abstract

At the roots of the Social Gospel movement, theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch envisioned an American society uncorrupted by the industrial economy used to sustain it. Following into the first decades of the 20th Century, the means of spreading this message—that building the Kingdom of God was of more pressing importance than prayer or asceticism—eventually became entangled with consumerism and the American aesthetic crystallized in the 1950s. *The Music Man* (1962) remains a valuable embodiment, tribute, and critique of how the author Meredith Willson and his audience look back on an era largely shaped by the Social Gospel. Meanwhile, *Footloose* (1984), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) provide similarly sentimental reflections on historical circumstances as thematic obstacles to personal fulfillment. However, each of these stories valorize poetic articulation rather than revolution as a means of bettering society and inclusively framing those on the margins. This essay will argue that such musical “cult classics” have not only served to fill an emergent gap in America’s growing secularity and waning Social Gospel movement, but in some ways carried on the latter tradition by brandishing some of its essential values and rationale as a theology of *communitas*.

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I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes.
If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

—2 Corinthians 12:15

Indeed, the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my credit in Men’s eyes much wrong:
Have drowned my glory in a shallow Cup,
And sold my Reputation for a Song

—Omar Khayyam

“With music one can seduce men to every error and every truth:
who could refute a tone?”

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, sec. 106

There is, however, a speedy limit to the use of heroes. Every genius is defended from approach
by quantities of unavailability.

—Emerson, *Representative Men*

However, a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more’s the pity. So, if any one man, in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him not be backward, but let him cheerfully allow himself to spend and be spent in that way. And the man that has anything bountifully laughable about him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for.

—Melville, *Moby Dick*, “Breakfast”

“The Music Man is an anti-intellectual ode to the middlebrow that cleverly sells the very premise that makes it a commercial triumph – and that is the secret to its success,” concludes Kimberly Fairbrother Canton in her 2008 *Modern Drama* critique of the film. While admitting a taste for its guilty pleasures, Raymond Knapp, Harriet Malinowitz, and Michael Schwartz similarly conclude their scholarly analyses with a foreboding nod to concepts like Adorno’s “culture industry.”¹ In the years following its film adaptation release in 1962, marketed rebellion became a staple of popular culture entertainment. A story about a barbershop philosopher and con-man who mutually falls in love with his prey may seem retrospectively saccharine, even alien, to a public now well acquainted with the realities of a pluralistic society. However, *Footloose* (1984)² tells the similar story of a charismatic lead who moves to a small town and liberates youth culture from misguided moralization. *Dirty Dancing* (1987)³ depicts a dancing instructor and unwilling hero who transcends his marginality through a relationship with a student from the upper class. Roger Ebert wrote in his Sun-Times review that the latter film “plays like one long, sad, compromise” of raised but un-confronted social issues.⁴ By contrast, *Footloose* depicts overt tensions and reactions to existential conflict, punctuated with what Ebert disdained as “prepackaged MTV-type production numbers.”⁵ He wrote in this case that, “if the movie had only relaxed and allowed itself to admit how silly the situation is, it could have been more fun.” Ironically, this is the very premise of the film, the conviction of *Dirty Dancing*’s leading lady, and the logic Canton finds problematic in *The Music Man*.⁶

¹ Kimberly Fairbrother Canton, “‘Who’s Selling Here?’ Sounds Like The Music Man Is Selling and We’re Buying,” *Modern Drama*. 51:1 (2008): 59. The phrase from Adorno comes from a book chapter, co-authored with Max Horkheimer, entitled, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1944]). Other primary critiques mentioned include the following: Harriet Malinowitz, “Textual Trouble in River City: Literacy, Rhetoric, and Consumerism in The Music Man,” *College English*. 61:1 (1999): 58-82; Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Michael Schwartz, “The Music Man Cometh: The Tuneful Pipe Dreams of Professor Harold Hill,” *Text & Presentation* (2008) The Comparative Drama Conference, ed. by Stratos E. Constantinidis (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 2009): 169-77.

² *Footloose*. Dir. Herbert Ross. Written by Dean Pitchford. Paramount Pictures, 1984.

³ *Dirty Dancing*. Dir. Emile Ardolino. Written by Eleanor Bergstein. Vestron Pictures, 1987.

⁴ Roger Ebert, “Dirty Dancing,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, Aug. 21, 1987.

⁵ Ebert, “Footloose,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 1, 1984.

⁶ *The Music Man*. Dir. Morton Da Costa. Written by Meredith Willson. Warner Brothers, 1962.

[2] Beneath the adolescent rebellion and nostalgia of these three films is an arguably deeper theme, reinforced by each event and interaction within the stories. Synonymously for this paper, the Social Gospel and *communitas* can be seen behind each character's coming of age, each reckoning monologue, and the denouement of a dance to which everyone is invited.⁷ Furthermore, the fact that each has continued to live in popular imagination—through live theatrical productions and sentimental parallels to the personal lives of fans—suggests that the spirit of *communitas* achieved in the finales is not only entertaining as diversion, but develops a sacred aura by virtue of its own rarity or implausibility within real life.⁸ The term *religion* is widely thought to have originated from the Latin *religare*, meaning to “re-connect” an individual or community with a divine power, but the liquidation of this dialectical relationship is what makes these films and the Social Gospel unusual. That is, parent-child relationships, romances, and wider communities are democratized to emphasize the healing power of love: rather than valorizing the obverse aspects of individuals in a relationship, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.⁹ Free, natural, *and* harmonious forms of expression are both prophetic and symptomatic of the ideal society in these

⁷ Based on Martin Buber's “essential We,” Victor Turner defines *communitas* as “the implicit law of wholeness arising out of relations between totalities. But *communitas* is intrinsically dynamic, and never quite realized.” See Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 84.

⁸ “Bergstein [*Dirty Dancing* writer] says she was ‘haunted’ by cries for a sequel. A continuous flow of fan mail suggested ‘that while they watch (the movie) something happens to them while they are in this presence,’ she says. ‘It means they want to be there, and the natural next step is live theater. That’s when we decided to do that.’” See Mike Snider, “*Dirty Dancing*: Baby’s out of the corner,” *USA Today*, April 24, 2007. All three films do have a parallel life in theatre. *Footloose* is a less reliably documented and more complex fan phenomenon, partly having to do with the fact that it is based on a true story: See Kent Demaret, “You Got Trouble in Elmore City: That’s Spelled with a ‘t,’ Which Rhymes with ‘d’ and That Stands for Dancing,” *People*, May 19, 1980. Also, themusicmansquare.org represents an epitome of routine nostalgia for cultural forms featured in *The Music Man*: “it seemed only natural to celebrate the life and music of Meredith Willson by developing this multi-million dollar complex adjoining his boyhood home, not only to honor him but to *sustain* the spirit of ‘River City, Iowa.’” Emphasis added.

⁹ For Max Weber, the idea that love conquers all is a typical message of salvation religions. What makes the subjects of this paper exceptional (if at all) is that “love” is not taken to be an objective and abstract panacea; rather, it is pragmatically investigated and applied in different ways through narrative as a consistent way to prevent unnecessary conflict and alternately provoke when personal reconciliation is necessary. As Marian (the librarian) Paroo sings about her hypothetical love life in *The Music Man*, “And I would like him to be more interested in me than he is in himself, and more interested in us than in me...” Again, the exceptionality here may be subtle, but there is a marked difference between longing for certain acquired social effects and longing for a self-contained and inter-subjective relationship. This difference is made clear for *Dirty Dancing* audiences when Baby’s sister pursues a misguided relationship with Robbie, a secretly promiscuous waiter at the resort who avidly follows the principles of individualism and exceptionality in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*.

depictions. This is emphasized by portraying the attempts to structure an environment or means for that expression as being equally problematic as egoism. In trying to transcend temptations and expectations in American culture, the protagonists of these films echo the ambition and style of Walter Rauschenbusch as he tried to spread the Kingdom of God. While no references are made to any history of religion, *The Music Man*, *Footloose*, and *Dirty Dancing* arguably reignite and articulate Social Gospel concerns by narrative demonstration.

[3] Criticism of these films has largely been based in the paradoxical profitability of sentimental films that do their best to distract audiences from the economic world. In many ways this is the aim of the entertainment industry anyway, but the sinister potential detected by Canton and others has much to do with the way *The Music Man* epitomizes consumer ideals in the form of “middlebrow” humor. This is to say that concepts of high and low class, artistic standards, and even morality are reduced to toys for the popular hero to bring under his rhetorical control. Instead of superior might, morals, pedigree, or divine guidance helping the hero overcome challenges, the creator of middlebrow entertainment undermines the qualification of these attributes so that mediocrity may be celebrated and elitism denigrated. Celebrating mediocrity is the main fear of Canton and the other critics, while a many-leveled critique of social identities and categories is the more relevant aspect for Social Gospel concerns.

[4] A middlebrow protagonist is immune from socially constructed standards (including law) as long as the story develops and portrays his impassioned behavior as justified and overdetermined by wider circumstances. Musical expression thus fills an important role in these films as the underlying cause for the hero to defend. Instead of directing primary attention to a heroic person or group in itself, or vague prophecies that they utter, an emotional-metaphysical force is cast as threatened by the immediate, physical, secular, or economic forces around them. By this logic, an innocent revolution cultivates social solidarity and clears space for the *communitas* provided by, in this case, music and expressive dance. Because such revolution may in some cases be unnecessary, redundant, or

naïve, what is actually being exchanged between audience and the filmmakers is left questionable. The primary answer posited by this essay is that these films have more in common with oral tradition than literary innovation: the performance evokes communality from its audience, rather than relaying a specific cultural discourse.

[5] Ideally, the written word operates as a transparent nexus of denotation and connotation, and by this logic any use of it should be conveying new information *relating to* but not *about* its assumed referent. The connotation of a word will change over time, but may remain seamlessly conflated with the original denotation within the realm of a tradition. Meanwhile, oral traditions typically rely on connotations and allusions for their symbolic content, repetition and analogy for psychological posterity, and in some cases musical accompaniment for atmosphere. It is a ritual form of communication by nature of its format, and one might even go so far as to say that this factor shapes the content and character of oral storytelling.¹⁰ Without the timelessness that literature attempts to secure, the oral format requires active engagement from both the audience and narrator. There is no such thing as a definitive version of such performances because this would alienate listeners as consumers of a pre-packaged product. Even in the case of highly perfected or crystallized iterations, such as the film versions of *The Music Man*, *Footloose*, and *Dirty Dancing*, a desire to unpack the wealth of allusions and symbols prompts the response of an interpretive chorus to explain myriad implied facets to themselves and others. This is to say that such singular works betray their own dependence on a wider cultural backdrop because they would be unintelligible if taken at face value. In terms of cultural discourse, this type of storytelling is an escape from the nonnegotiable regularities of the environment in which the performer and audience find themselves. In this sense, the purpose is not to impart cultural knowledge so much as to express the intrinsic value of what Nietzsche pejoratively labeled “the herd instinct.” This

¹⁰ Liz Garnett explains, in the context of barbershop singing, that “Overdetermination, like iteration, is both a mechanism by which an ideology is perpetuated, and a signal of its precariousness” (55). In a musical tradition this is considered a matter of taste, but the need for preservation of a cultural idea or sensibility may be a more integral part of oral traditions. Since barbershopping is both the former and latter, the ideological elements remain ambivalently tempered by the practice itself (this is discussed more in note 28). See Garnett, “Ethics and Aesthetics: The Social Theory of Barbershop Harmony,” *Popular Music* 18:1 (Cambridge University Press, Jan. 1999): 41-61.

kind of social state, corraling singular perspectives instead of offering one, ironically has a historical propensity to be preserved in new cultural forms for the local participants. Rivalries with other groups may naturally ensue from this development; however, “in its genesis and central tendency,” what Turner would refer to as *communitas* “is universalistic.”¹¹ The anthropological concept of individual liminality deals with the ritual acquisition of identity, where previous forms are usually discarded like old clothing in exchange for new. *Communitas* is the corresponding phenomenon in a group setting, where roles (if not goals, identities, and beliefs as well) are temporarily suspended from normal functioning for the sake of ritual processes or events. Without a specified end for *communitas*, its existence would be entirely predicated on intrinsic goals like functioning democracy.

[6] Codified communication grants to itself the right to existence in a free market of ideas because its specificity is absolved from dependence on symbolic associations. Without a separate and objective value for oral storytelling to represent, it must be paradoxically taken at face value as something which only attains such value when shared rather than exchanged. In this sense, it has an affinity with the notion of credit. The context of credit allows *communitas* to remain universalistic without coercing any participant to adhere to rigid expectations. For a salesman, it is advantageous to invoke this because he is not indefinitely bound in a relationship with customers. When successful, he leaves the situation having exchanged the subjective value of his product for objectively recognized currency. The Social Gospel began as a response to this kind of problem when it came to the relationship between religious authority and the lay population.¹² At the turn of the 20th century, a growing demand for progressive social reforms coincided with decay in the respectively high

¹¹ Turner, *Dramas Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 202. He goes on to clarify that this means the true form has no structure, but remains an “unspecialized,” amateur “spring of pure possibility.”

¹² According to Christopher Hodge Evans, “one cannot understand the social gospel as a theological movement apart from its liberal theological heritage.” See Evans, ed., *The Social Gospel Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 3. He clarifies in an endnote that this does not mean the movement should be interchangeably conflated with liberal theology, but that it was an expression of the latter; one might even say it was a *performative* development, in Turner’s use of the term (see note 31), an attempt to express and apply latent ideas which would normally be confined to personal struggle or the written word.

and low class forms of esoteric Christianity found in theology and pre-Civil War revivalism. In 1897, Charles Sheldon published a novel titled *In His Steps*, which publicly introduced the central theme of the movement that clergy and laymen alike must emulate Jesus both as Christians and citizens of an industrialized society.¹³ Many other liberal ministers and writers followed in Sheldon's steps, but Walter Rauschenbusch is remembered for having articulated the movement in clear theological terms. In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), he wrote that "Christianity must have had a strong impetus to evoke such stirrings of social unrest and discontent. It was not purely religious, but also a democratic and social movement."¹⁴ Because of the immediate relevance of Jesus' teachings to his worldly circumstances, the content rather than the form of his rhetoric is emphasized as an evocation of latent possibilities for better living. "Or, to state it far more truly," Rauschenbusch continues, "it was so strongly and truly religious that it was of necessity democratic and social also." In this stage lighting, Jesus is presented as embodying the likes of both Socrates and Plato: he is a frustrated teacher far beyond his time, trying to plant the seeds of a democratic¹⁵ Kingdom of God without necessarily crowning himself philosopher king.¹⁶

¹³ Cara Burnidge suggests that Sheldon is the underappreciated core of the movement because the format of fiction allowed him to take a many-leveled approach to the subject. Rauschenbusch criticized him for not carrying out the implications in social theory. See Burnidge, "Charles M. Sheldon and the Heart of the Social Gospel Movement," (MA thesis, online: <http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses/available/etd-04102009-083459/unrestricted/BurnidgeCThesis.pdf>). Though the writings of Rauschenbusch are taken to be sufficient for making this comparison to the Social Gospel, current conceptions of it are as open-armed as they are obscure. Susan Lindley explains that what unites and distinguishes the amorphous movement is that it has "moved beyond traditional Christian charity in its recognition of corporate identity, corporate and structural sin, and social salvation, along with concern for individual sin, faith, and responsibility" (24). By corporate, of course, she refers to the original sense of interdependence within the body of a group, not the personhood of corporations themselves. See Lindley, "Deciding Who Counts: Toward a Revised Definition of the Social Gospel" in *The Social Gospel Today*, 17-26. Lindley advocates the perspective of a universal "spectrum," rather than concrete formulation of the Social Gospel. Leading up to the above quote, she notes that she originally accepted the criticisms of the movement as "theologically, politically, and economically naïve...that it was bound by middle-class assumptions and prejudices..." as well as silent on women's rights (23). Having involved herself in modern social rights issues, she advocates open interpretation as supportive of her identification with the historical movement. Inversely, she sees no reason to exclude those who do not identify as Social Gospellers.

¹⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, ed by Paul Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 114. This centennial edition used for this paper includes commentary from intellectuals including Cornel West and Richard Rorty, making the page numbering different from original copies.

¹⁵ A "democratic Kingdom" may sound paradoxical, but it is essential to Rauschenbusch's formulation of the Social Gospel that the Kingdom of God could only be properly ideal if it is egalitarian, friendly, and classless. This has to do with his concept of sin, which will be mentioned further down. Most of those he

[7] The title character Harold Hill finds himself unwittingly in the position of a philosopher-conductor by the end of *The Music Man*, challenged by the citizens of River City to materialize empty promises of musical instruction with their blessing of his patently amateur style.¹⁷ This culminates as the comedic release of tensions built throughout, concerning his flippant manipulation of town parents. Over the course of a few days, Hill creates a bubble of expectations while inflating egos, selling band instruments and uniforms, and leaving all initial instruction to an intuitive “think system.” Professor Harold Hill is actually a stage name, and the man behind it delights in his maintained liminality: by refusing to take on a concrete social identity, he is able to simulate any one he likes.¹⁸ However, by the end his underhanded sweet-talking with the town librarian turns to blind-sighted love, and she stands up for him when his cover is blown by reminding the townspeople of how much harmony and imagination Hill brought to the town. This implicates him as a virtual human placebo, an

cites in support of his arguments are German theologians like Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Kant is also mentioned for the analogous conception of duty-based ethics as the most liberating form for an enlightened society. On this note, Robert Esposito seems to unwittingly describe democracy when comparing *communitas* to Kant’s categorical imperative: he finds it so idealistic that it is “antibiological,” a vain and “never-ending obligation, one that prescribes what is prohibited and prohibits what is prescribed.” See Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 17.

¹⁶ Certainly, a more traditional view of Christ emphasizes his divine status in a kingly fashion, but Social Gospelers evaded the semantics of titles by focusing on the message less than the messenger. Determining the intent of Jesus’ ministry is certainly a central conflict in Christian history, but Social Gospelers leaned toward the metaphorical interpretation. Rauschenbusch laments (rather ironically) in *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1917) that, “Theology has made the divinity of Christ a question of nature rather than character” (150). This primarily refers to the temporal, non-linguistic nature of personal development in contrast to concepts of authority and natural essence (i.e. divinity).

¹⁷ Michael Schwartz emphasizes the sinister implication of this ending to the film, being analogous to ending the gospel narrative with Jesus’ condemnation to the cross without mentioning the resurrection. However, as Jerry Camery-Hoggatt suggests of open endings and irony in Mark’s Gospel, shirked conclusions allow the audience to engage the story with imagination and faith (176-7). See Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and Subtext* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). He summarizes in his preface, “When we ignore the non-logical aspects of language we necessarily miss important dimensions of the Bible’s depth and power” (xi).

¹⁸ Though it is speculative theory of mind, the initially sociopathic behavior of a con-man like Harold Hill would correspond with an extreme utilitarian view of identity. His domestication in the end is a shift from this view of *communitas* as a sales tool to seeing it as something of intrinsic value which need not be abused to reap benefits.

accidental prophet, naturally raising questions of symbolic meaning and the middlebrow ethic.¹⁹

[8] *The Music Man* is set in 1912, at the height of the progressive era in politics and prewar idealism for the Social Gospel. Unfortunately, with the advent of WWI and patriotic suspicion of German ideas, the appeal of borderline socialist thinkers like Rauschenbusch largely turned to suspicion.²⁰ As Susan Curtis writes, the Social Gospel movement was transformed into a “consuming faith”—visions of utopia became entangled with the means of its intended propagation in advertising.²¹ This began as a proverbial and literal descent from the pulpit and into the world. Curtis summarizes the climate at the turn of the century, saying, “Social Gospelers and social reformers hoped to provide the environment and tools necessary to allow Americans to fulfill their potential and find meaning and purpose in a cause larger than themselves.”²² Whether this was a moral or an economic prospect, the differences dissolved when addressing industrial work conditions or unwholesome business practices.

[9] By the 1920s, the utility of Americans framing their callings as national teamwork transformed into faith in the nation itself, rather than ongoing commitment to building what

¹⁹ “Middlebrow” simply refers to the mediation of high and low “brows,” or critical dispositions toward culture. Canton especially pays attention to this as empty consumerist seduction, saying in her introduction that Hill “plays on the vulnerabilities of the citizens of River city.” The author agrees, but takes into account the complexity of the turning point within the climax. It is precisely the awareness of exposed vulnerability which inflames the townspeople to drag Hill to the town hall and punish him, to compensate for irresponsibly trusting in him as an educational savior. Having accepted Marian’s contrary testimony, they are once again confronted by their own judgmental weaknesses. Much of the humor plays into their unscathed and dull reception of these events, but Willson himself claimed this play “depends upon its technical faithfulness to the real small-town Iowans of 1912 who certainly did not think they were funny at all” (quoted in Malinowitz, 77). It still remains ambiguous whether this ending is an “anti-intellectual ode” to commercialism, or an over-simplified and anti-elitist illustration of *communitas* (which cannot be branded). The author submits that, at the end of the day, Willson’s play and memoirs are more consistently focused on solidarity than marketability or even nationalism. Nevertheless, it may be unfair to read ideology into the work of a comedian/musician/radio host.

²⁰ Curtis suggests this turn of events contributed to his swift decline in health and passing before the war ended, “It would be only a slight exaggeration to conclude that Rauschenbusch died of a broken heart” (114). See Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²¹ Ibid, 23. This is the thesis of her book.

²² Ibid, 132.

Social Gospelers would call the Kingdom of God. In many ways there was no argument against this kind of national pride. The United States had demonstrated its might in war and industry, and if religious idealism was not simply naïve, it seemed to distract from the tangible, secular construction of a brighter tomorrow. In retrospect, what may have been missing after 1918 (the end of WWI and Rauschenbusch) is the covalent wariness of institutional and organizational corruption, overshadowed by a refocusing on specialization of the individual.²³ The next few decades were not necessarily rife with corruption, but the essential premise of Social Gospel idealism was that the ideal society would develop in non-economic terms, through a prioritization of solidarity that transcended all forms of identity. Instead, theory was superseded by economic methodology. The lightness of material covering this development may be predicated on the historical predictability of failed social movements. The Social Gospel itself largely interpreted Jesus' early teachings as a tenuous, lost, and now recovered hope for humanity. Max Weber, writing his seminal sociological essays on religion during Rauschenbusch's most active years, explained that, "ultimately no genuine religion of salvation has overcome the tension between their religiosity and a rational economy."²⁴

[10] Universal solidarity was the ultimate goal of this interpretation of Christianity, a pragmatically realized community requiring open moral and democratic regulation of activities. As a "post-millennial" interpretation of salvation, the Social Gospel saw the realization of the Kingdom of God as an organic and voluntary process to which Jesus offered guidance and an invitation. His return to Earth, perhaps even his divinity, was almost irrelevant to the content of his teachings which were already in common possession. By contrast, a more historically feasible and typical way to foster solidarity and theoretical

²³ Ibid, 176-7. This warrants an entirely separate paper, but one might conclude that according to Curtis's analysis, the Social Gospel provided the conditions of *communitas* required for American society to develop the culture of nationalism we see in decades preceding the Vietnam War: "it helped ease the transition from Protestant Victorianism to a secular consumer culture" (xv). This is to say that not only did the movement prescribe values indicative of *communitas*, but actually yielded the same function described by Turner, as a liminal period for social structures to be taken apart and reassembled rather than remain fluid. Another separate discussion could be devoted to the changing attitudes toward identity and society, reflected in the characters.

²⁴ Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 332.

consensus is to withdraw from society-wide ambitions and form smaller, independent communities. Nostalgia for the small-town aesthetic plays into the ideal of manageable solidarity, where credit exists along lines of trust and availability. The first scene of *The Music Man* emphasizes this premise with a train car full of salesman lamenting the decline of store-front markets, speaking with the rhythm of the train and no melody. “Credit ain’t no good for a notion salesman,” one of them blurts out. Without a small and personal community, the concept of credit becomes “old-fashioned.” Forced to take their wares on tour, the salesmen travel like missionaries, trying their best to exchange sensational and exotic goods with locals for cold, hard, universally accepted, legal tender. They remain in character, despite frustrations with their jobs, because the air of *communitas* which they evoke for the prologue remains appropriately *spontaneous*.

[11] “Spontaneous,” for Victor Turner, is synonymous with *existential communitas*, in that it arises in opposition to pragmatic social constructions and is normally accompanied by sweeping generalizations about history or mankind.²⁵ Though the opening scene makes no reference to “free community” or fraternity, it is very much implied by their frustrations with its antithesis. The direct honesty of their discussion, in contrast to suspicious sales slogans on their stowed luggage, also points to the rarity of overhearing professionals speak without abridging or condescending to the layman. It is a chance for them to blurt out thoughts without expecting the talk to lead anywhere or to further their reputation. Ironically, existential generalization is typically part of the salesman’s tactics of relating to and eliciting trust from customers, distracting them from fiscal concerns and illustrating common goals. Pushing this perversion to its extreme is how Harold Hill successfully fools local communities. He only introduces himself after successfully convincing his audience that he has their best intentions at heart. Randomly picking the newest social phenomenon in the town, a pool table, Hill spins an impassioned sermon that suggests this poses a threat to the moral discipline of children. His arrival naturally being only a simple, happy coincidence, Hill then moves in to make his sales pitch to a warmed crowd. Another simple example of

²⁵ Turner, *Dramas Fields and Metaphors*, 169. On this same page, he briefly overviews the two proceeding forms of attempting to structure *communitas*, normativity and ideology.

spontaneous *communitas* would be the four River City school-board members who follow Hill through the whole story. They are portrayed as encumbered by their own professional austerity, which leads them to discordant quarreling on any given topic until they set out to collect Hill's credentials for the mayor. Much like every other threat that comes to him, Hill decides to form a barbershop quartet out of them, explaining that "singing is just sustained talking." No longer speaking past each other, their different vocal tones "become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event,"²⁶ and any questions about academic accreditation evaporate in the ecstasy of four-part harmony. Both the travelling salesmen and school-board members express spontaneous *communitas* as rather flat characters temporarily behaving out of character.

[12] In its typified form, barbershopping is easy to associate with a host of obsolete and nationalistic artifacts of American culture which *The Music Man* suspiciously sports; indeed, Meredith Willson considered the Buffalo Bills' performance as the school-board members to be the "centerpiece" of the show. Beyond appearances, however, Willson himself boils down the appeal to something which is even more democratic than the Fourth of July: "Barbershop quartette singing, by the way, is the only art of its kind: where the pleasure is primarily for the singers—where performance for an audience is only secondary."²⁷ He adds that it cannot be taught, that it is "strictly trial and error faking," which speaks to his insistence that trained singers are incompatible with the practice and that one "mustn't be an individual when you sing." In *Four Parts, No Waiting*, Gage Averill elaborates this insight: "The act of hearing—in the presence of others—links participants in relationships of internalization and externalization of sound, enveloping listeners in auditory co-presence...[which] encourages the production of a powerful, transformative experience of the self as a participant in community, resulting in a greater sense of unity and solidarity." Without the obstacles of semantics and opinions, this seems to illustrate anti-reification toward immediate intimacy.²⁸

²⁶ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 48. This is his explicit description of spontaneous *communitas*.

²⁷ Meredith Willson, *But He Doesn't Know the Territory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 108.

²⁸ See Gage Averill, *Four Parts, No Waiting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 90, [quote] 178. Averill also traces the history, showing it belongs to neither race nor era, but originated in Austria. Garnett

The complexity of arrangement consists of the experimental interaction between vocal strata, and often dominant or discordant tones may even be purposely added just for the effect of regaining equilibrium. This functions analogously to syncopation in rhythm, where playing a beat out of sync accents and even directs attention back to the underlying flow of the music. While the cultural wealth sported by the form of barbershop singing somewhat overshadows this principle, the content is precisely that of compromised individuality as a trade for harmonic ecstasy. It is not a choir of angels, though perhaps even more appropriate in that for Rauschenbusch, the Kingdom of God was a matter of “transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”²⁹

[13] After some sort of spontaneous or existential *communitas* is experienced, a phase of normativity may begin to develop. This primarily concerns each of these films as an attempt to make the air of spontaneity survive.³⁰ Turner suggests at the end of *The Ritual Process* that the flexibility of social relations in our post-industrial age creates perhaps unprecedented potential for the realization of *communitas*, though he remained reasonably skeptical of any attempts to separate this collective liminality from the structures to which it stands in

largely illustrates how barbershopping today is an ideological phenomenon which emphasizes perfect form more than amateurism—despite the nature of its title: “The link between music and culture is clearly posited within the barbershop community in the metaphorical conflation of social and musical harmony; this connection, however, is obscured within the theoretical discourse in favour of originary accounts grounded in the discourse of the natural” (58). “The natural” here refers to certain conceptions of amateurism which give the practice its down-to-earth aesthetic. Garnett primarily focuses on the paradox here that barbershop singing is a skill developed, let alone perfected, by few. This is to say that barbershopping is ironically a crystallized and elite form of expression for untrained and authentic feeling. While the theoretical “culture industry” gleams its negative aura from potential ubiquity, barbershopping and similar practices are self-induced marginal activities; Garnett suggests that internal inconsistencies speak to an adaptive, reciprocal interaction between musical and social identities.

²⁹ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 54. On this note, he also claimed that “a solidaristic religious experience is more distinctively Christian than an individualistic [one]” (*Theology for Social Gospel*, 108).

³⁰ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge decline models of cult formation, which include solidarity in psychopathological mindsets, entrepreneurial movements, and the subcultural evolution of contrarian views. All three relate to normative *communitas* in this paper, as such model declensions do tend to overlap. Entrepreneurial forms of cult are particularly relevant here in regard to the potential for failure and the economic analogies used by prophets themselves when a cult begins forming and pushing beyond the existential. See Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 171-83. “New Religious Movement”(NRM) is the more appropriate and accepted term for *cult* in scholarship now because it acknowledges the fluid nature of these developments as often direct reactions to historical realities. This lies in tandem with the importance of studying *communitas* as a belief without tenets, overdetermined rather than ordained.

contrast, like a shadow.³¹ He often referred to it as “anti-structure,” except when acknowledging that discussion of the concept would demonstrate it is much more subtle and complex; after all, describing anything with a prefix is a structured way to think about it. Whether this spontaneous or existential phenomenon can be maintained without adopting an *ideological* structure (Turner’s third phase) is the conundrum of sustained *communitas*, the continuity of the Social Gospel, and a matter of critical reception for these films.

[14] Becoming a salesman is an ascetic and pragmatic way to deal with society and its developments, but those who already have rapport with a small community may seek to realize their salvation in a commune of some sort.³² *Footloose* portrays an evangelistic form of this with a culturally stagnant small town, affectively monopolized by the moral passion of the town preacher and city board member Reverend Moore. Though he is implicated as a paternal source of judgment and tensions in Bomont, his secular conversion is foreshadowed by pragmatic disagreements he has along the way with overzealous administrative peers. The

³¹ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), 203. Though his steps were light in this initial exposition, subsequent writings on these dynamic processes emphasize its ubiquity: “Structure is always ancillary to, dependent on, secreted from process” (*Anthropology of Performance*, 84). He also summarizes his etymologically informed understanding of performance as a “furnishing” or “bringing to completion,” a fruition of subjective experience (*From Ritual to Theatre*, 91). This is a somewhat morally loaded contradiction of the connotation that it is typically blatant diversion or make-believe, which would give it a specific purpose or commoditized exchange value: “...major genres of cultural performance and narration not only originate in the social drama, but also continue to draw meaning and force from [it]” (*Anthropology of Performance*, 94). If he was right about this, it means performance either unfairly teases audiences by mirroring their internal angst, or pays tribute to them by articulating their concerns. In case of the latter, this is the entry point for Amanda Diederich-Hirsh’s analysis of the Grateful Dead as a cultural phenomenon that does its best to escape structure while maximizing solidarity. See “Examining Grateful Dead Improvisation as a Catalyst for Creating Sustained Communitas” in Jim Tuedio and Stan Spector, ed., *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 2010), 294-309. “Sustained communitas” is a phrase which the author borrows from her essay.

³² See Sarah Love Brown, *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). This compilation of essays specifically addresses different forms of communal experiments from the 18th to 20th century, mostly being religiously motivated in ways similar to the prominent examples of the Oneida or Amish. What distinguishes the subject of this book from the subject of the present essay is that *communitas* and the social gospel have no intentions or prescriptions except the uncovering and evasion of hypocrisy. The premise here is that any formalization of subjective hopes or ideas as external to those who hold them is inherently hypocritical. Rauschenbusch is remembered for *articulating* the social movement, but his intent was neither to invent new interpretation nor have the final word. In this way, the paradigm of oral tradition is much more relevant than that of literary theology. The “intentional” communities in Brown’s book seek solidarity by removing themselves from prevailing historical discourse, while Social Gospelers sought to peacefully supplant the latter as an illegitimate occupant of a prophetic role (not unlike Dostoyevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor”).

audience arrives in the aftermath of a rare car crash that killed several teenagers driving home from a party, which prompted a ban on foreign pleasures like alcohol, dancing, and popular music.³³ Despite good intentions for the safety and sanctity of the community, the reverend's daughter and her peers continue to drink and behave recklessly on the outskirts of town. They do so with a vengeance, a new delight in evading authority. Meanwhile, Boston newcomer and protagonist Ren McCormack, who is frustrated by the whole situation, resolves to start a petition and challenge the law against public dancing. In the end, he successfully neutralizes antagonisms by quoting the Bible in defense of dance as celebration. This delivers a crippling blow to the façade of prudence, but Rev. Moore's decision to acquiesce a school dance is equally influenced by resistance within his own family. Mrs. Moore explains to her husband that he "can lift a congregation up so high they have to look down to see heaven. But it's the one to one where you need a little work." Symbolic mediation of social relations is routine within structured and religious societies, yet the audience here is presented with a democratic and social responsibility which supersedes traditional religiosity for the sake of *communitas*.

[15] Walter Rauschenbusch was thoroughly familiar with this problem of religion as a distraction when applied in a top-down fashion: "If a man wants to give honest help, he must fill himself with the spirit of Jesus and divest himself of the ecclesiastical [or Pharisaical]

³³ While *The Music Man*'s release may not have been a direct commentary on the presidency of Eisenhower, the latter two films are certainly relevant to the Reagan administration. *Footloose* was released just before the PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center) formed and began questioning the influence of music on younger generations. The term "footloose [and fancy free]" itself comes from a nautical reference to mainsails that are not tightened to a "boom," which would keep the sail from shifting direction or wildly flapping in the wind. *Dirty Dancing* similarly plays on themes of youth being tied down by the older generation, but more directly calls into question the "trickle down" effect in light of class antagonisms and ample misunderstandings. In a chapter on "Sacrificial Religion," David Chidester compares cult leader Jim Jones to Reagan as mirror images when it came to the ideology of redemptive child sacrifice—respectively, one against capitalism and the other considering it our only hope for civilization. Both believed (in different contexts) that sacrificing innocent youth for a good cause would deal a symbolic blow to the other side, which would surely corrupt the young into a fate worse than death if unchallenged. See Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). By emphasizing *communitas*, it seems these films push against such overtly epic perspectives. In this case, Jesus would not have to die if he had properly articulated his notion of the Kingdom of God to his accusers. One might pose to Rauschenbusch the question of why he did not, but symbolic death as a last resort may have been his explanation.

point of view.”³⁴ While this directs attention to the questionability of institutions, it also alludes to his suggestion that a “regenerated personality” is the “greatest contribution” which one can make to the Social Gospel movement.³⁵ Divesting from socially inherited classifications allows one to apply oneself flexibly and responsively to problems without explicit scriptural guidance. In this case, the Bible is interpreted as more informative than it is instructive. When offering a conclusive concession to his congregation, Rev. Moore declares that, “I’m really like a first-time parent, who makes mistakes and tries to learn from them.” Whether or not this beginner’s mindset is only a passing moment of clarity for Moore and the town, it is immortalized in narrative in much the same way that any conversion or religious consecration takes place in scripture. Without proof of continuity, the tangibility and full impact of changes in consciousness remains questionable in literary form.

[16] In *Dirty Dancing*, Frances “Baby” Houseman follows in the vein of Rev. Moore’s daughter, admitting to her father (a doctor) that she lost her virginity to a young man from the lower class. In both cases, the initial parental shock actually brings father and daughter into a position where differences of opinion can be confronted. The plot, like *Footloose* and *The Music Man*, in many ways resembles *Romeo and Juliet*, but devotes all of its energy to redeeming tragic flaws by demonstrating the wisdom (rather than hopeless romanticism) of youth. Baby is on vacation with her family at a lakefront resort when she meets Johnny Castle, the young resident dance instructor who is forced to do his job by the book. Key to this premise is the strategic setting in 1963, both a time of autobiographical nostalgia for the author and an “optative” moment before historical events set large changes in motion. “Dirty dancing” refers to the kind of dancing done behind closed doors, before rock and roll became publicly accepted. The merengue and tango take place in the facilities, but young employees and friends take to their own private space after hours to relieve what is suppressed by form. As a kind of “soul dancing,” the film’s choreographer Kenny Ortega explains that, “[Dirty dancing is] not about technique as much as it is about feeling.”³⁶

³⁴ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 285.

³⁵ Ibid, 287. One might do well to keep in mind that he was a Baptist minister.

³⁶ Quoted from Production Notes in the “About” section of www.dirtydancing.com.

[17] Johnny is portrayed as a responsible and morally innocent play-thing of the upper class, which naturally sparks the Samaritan interest of Baby as an ambitious Peace Corps applicant studying “economics of underdeveloped countries.” Through the micro-scale community building of the couple, Baby and Johnny are confronted with “underdeveloped” aspects of their personalities and worldviews.³⁷ Once their relationship is revealed, Johnny is fired for becoming involved with a guest, but comes back in the final scene to interrupt an event and declare how much he learned from Baby “about the kind of person I want to be.” This act resolves growing tensions between the two which were predicated on their former lives. Either is capable of leaving the relationship and invalidating the whole thing as exploitation of the other, but making public their love and mutual development reifies the contrary hopes of the audience that their secret *communitas* can be sustained. By this logic, the inter-subjective power of admitting to their relatively innocent transgressions inspires other characters to at least momentarily associate with timeless emotions rather than the contingent and socially constructed context. Without this implicit token of inter-subjectivity, *communitas* would similarly remain absent when Ren McCormack and Marian Paroo explain to parents in their towns just how vain and self-distracted their behavior has been throughout the whole story.

[18] This rhetoric of conversion and novelty becomes almost indistinguishable from the anthropological language of liminality—the distinction is based in the language itself and the attached symbolic meanings or associations. What makes *communitas* and the Social Gospel similar, and equally dissimilar from other types of social or religious phenomena, is that they are opposed to practicality when the practical requires settlement or taking something for granted. Legal tender does this by arbitrarily—though for practical reasons—reducing all valuation to a gold standard. Communities do this by trying to formulate laws, symbols, and vocabulary which seem to represent and thereby preserve their “values.”³⁸ Conversely,

³⁷ “The creation of a couple is parallel and simultaneous to the formation of a community,” says Rick Altman of folk musicals in *The American Film Musical*, 309 (quoted in Canton, 50; similarly, she quotes Knapp’s remark that the boys’ band also serves as a “literal and metaphorical basis for community building” 49).

³⁸ The late Richard Rorty, grandson of Rauschenbusch, was a prominent pragmatist philosopher perhaps best known for his theorization of this problem. He dissociated himself from campaigns of “liberal hope” (like the Social Gospel) because of the way that rhetoric used to rally such causes often distracts from any

though a paradox only in language, Social Gospelers are nothing but practical when practical means a reduction of all values to solidarity and empathy. What this requires is a collective recognition of humanity as a perpetually amateur species, as sinful in the sense of fallibility rather than corruption. “The idealization of evil is an indispensable means for its perpetuation and transmission,” argued Rauschenbusch, believing that if “[We] democratize the conception of God...the definition of sin will become more realistic.”³⁹

[19] In *The Music Man*, Marian suggests to parents (who are calling for the “tar-n-feathering” of Harold Hill) that by idealizing the concepts of good and evil they have blinded themselves from constructively confronting actual values and actual evil in their own lives. Much of this boils down to the already present vanity that Hill exploited for his own ends, selling instruments and distracting inquisitors by framing them within his grandiose visions. Whether the townspeople can live up to the dreams he planted is just as valid a question here as the plausibility of what he convinced them to believe in the first place. On his initial arrival, the townspeople present themselves to him with a wealth of gossip which has grown out of a lack of open discourse and, allegedly, jealousy. The opening of a public library years earlier is partly responsible, being a central and authoritative collection of foreign knowledge as well as “smutty” books (including works by Balzac and Khayyam) masquerading as classics. Though Marian the librarian’s climactic testimonial is subtle enough to implicitly defend herself and indict the parents’ judgment, it is emotional and direct enough to point out the subjective reality that Hill could not have tricked them if they had been responsible for their own views.

legitimate aims. For example, concern for the poor arguably has more to do with intangible empathy than with any metaphysical principle or law. See Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). His idea of solidarity is collective recognition of “private ironies” that language cannot represent; he advocates a literate public sector where the *content* of ideas would be more apparent than assumed form. There is a vast difference between building libraries or passing down religious texts and actually, publicly, engaging ideas within these texts. The only factor preventing an ideological conflation here with the Social Gospel is that Rorty was somewhat pessimistic about the ability of individuals to transcend their foibles in a social or religious cause. Nevertheless, it is skepticism with kindred roots, concerning the human inclination to reduce ideas or situations into vocabularies and then become complacent with this subjective achievement, forgetting that scripts or labels are only tools for a continuing human conversation.

³⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 66 and 48.

[20] The internal logic of the film drives this idea in parallel to the proposition that Hill helped everyone to begin realizing their dreams and potential—that not only were the “River City-zians” fooled by imported delusions, they were distracted from internal repressions. Ideally, collectively recognizing this means the “anti-structure” of *communitas* is consummated and fluid, continually developing, and that direct democratic relations might characterize the town’s social organization from that day on. However, there may remain room for skepticism because the enriching excitement and faith in music fostered by Harold Hill is ambiguously entangled in the rather vain portraits he formed for each of his customers. For example, the perpetually flustered and misspeaking mayor has his happiest moment in the film when Hill explains that the genetic inheritance of a specialized pinky finger means his son could be a legendary flugelhorn player. Just before paying for the instrument, Mayor Shinn realizes, “I haven’t got a son!” That which fooled customers also gave them hope in glory and inclusion in a virtuosic community. By proposing that all is solved by reconciling with the community, Marian and the rest of the town submit their personal identities to the higher value of *communitas*. This is at least initially mediated by the band as an open-ended collaborative project, being dependent on some form of meaningful consensus. Any doubt as to whether there is enough consensus is postponed by the young boys entering with instruments and uniforms to support Hill. In an endearing cacophony, they somewhat successfully play the melody of Beethoven’s “Minuet in G,” to the joy of tone-deaf parents and shock of Hill as he mimes a conducting role. Never expecting them to have enough faith in his “think system,” which relies on self-education by ear, Harold Hill is further alienated from his old self and reoriented toward the possibilities of a band we later see marching blissfully down Mainstreet to the credit music.

[21] Michael Schwartz suggests in his essay, “The Music Man Cometh,” that such endings are frustratingly ironic to a critical viewer because everything and nothing is solved when one or many take a moment to look beyond social constructions. Remaining is a looming question of what kind of role or place (other than prophetic) would Harold Hill and Johnny Castle have in society, post-exoteric conversion experience? Does an appreciation of Ecclesiastes 3 bring Ren and the Reverend closer to each other or send them off to explore

their own “purpose” on their own “time”? How do they all re-integrate once they step off the liminal stage? If *communitas* is perpetually maintained, no one leaves the stage. However the group decides to handle its paradigmatic shifting, a suggestion is made that charisma successfully contributed a concrete good to society. This “good” is revolutionary-type enthusiasm that is tempered by good intentions. Enthusiasm sparks hope based in such intentions, and the question of sustainability relies on the practical application of them—by the group, in a self-conscious manner. While there are primary characters which consume most of our active attention in these films, fully understanding the plot and endings requires the viewer to suppose there is hope for all, not just for the victorious hero and his princess. Without “the band,” Harold Hill is a permanent fugitive and Marian remains a prisoner of her unappreciated library. Without a school dance, Ren McCormack is unable to assimilate in Bomont, and Rev. Moore would continue to drift apart from his family and congregation. Without the resort, Johnny Castle is destined to become a house painter and the resort owner himself doubts whether he can compete with the market for foreign travel. When these independent prospects are diminished by a reopening of the community, the audience is empathically lured into at least a spontaneous form of *communitas*—a communal romance.

[22] Along with the Social Gospel, these films suggest to their audiences that *communitas* and the Kingdom of God are synonymously ever present and yet alternately constrained by our means of framing or realizing it. Whether pathological or spiritually authentic, it is a unique breed of religious sentiment which resists its own formalization.⁴⁰ It cannot be translated, marketed, institutionalized, nor perhaps discussed coherently. As a unit of exchange with the audience, it is an illegal tender in at least three ways. First of all, it is a non-linguistic reference to intimate (not necessarily sexual) relations, interpersonal cooperation for mutual reasons without reliance on social scripts. Secondly, it depicts hopeful solidarity which many may find so untenable as to be offensive, yet employs the “piper” who spreads this message and distracts audiences from how the “real world” works. Finally, in light of parallels with pragmatist philosophy, *communitas* and the Social Gospel

⁴⁰ By “sentiment,” the author means to direct attention to the *affective* rather than *effective* perspective on beliefs. The fact that films like these are popularly regarded as “cult films” is not irrelevant, but “sentiment” seems to more aptly describe such a theological trend. In light of “NRM” rhetoric, this is especially so.

are forms of cultural and religious exchange which do not bear the mark of tradition—the former might be likened to taboo-breaking and the latter represents Jesus without assuming his divinity as a platitude. On this note, it is interesting to see that, according to Turner himself, the very study of parallels between dynamic social crises and theatrical presentations of conflict has received criticism within anthropology. Clifford Geertz described Turner’s universal exploration of *communitas* as “a form for all seasons,” something so versatile and ambiguous that it threatens to distance anthropologists from the specific contexts of different social movements or cultural events.⁴¹ This is not an irrelevant concern, though it may primarily be a reflection of different goals: Geertz studied cultural symbols and how they reflected different modes of thought while Turner primarily studied processes of social interaction *between* symbolic forms. From within the Western scientific tradition, Turner disliked the propensity for knowledge-seekers to posit “predetermined orderings”⁴² to objects of study; likewise, bringing attention to social (thus dynamic) forms of evil and virtue was the primary focus of Rauschenbusch’s social theology.

[23] In his final work, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), Walter Rauschenbusch entreats his readers to “think less of the physical process of conception and more of the spiritual processes of desire, choice, affirmation, and self-surrender within [Jesus’] own will and personality.”⁴³ Through the theological prism of Rauschenbusch’s interpretation, Charles Sheldon’s contemporary question “what would Jesus do?” calls readers in the wake of the Social Gospel to think of Jesus as a perpetually liminal figure—that is, as a *living* intellect. If one assumes he did not give preordained answers to those who asked for them, a question is begged as to whether the Gospels are a tragedy or transcendent comedy. In either case, the Social Gospel extracted from these accounts a synoptic insight that texts and other forms of symbolic wealth are no substitute for direct confrontations and solidarity. There is no doubt

⁴¹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 106. Earlier on the same page, Turner acknowledges that he has had to defend his research interests and methodology “against such critics as my former teachers Sir Raymond Firth and the late Max Gluckman, who have accused me of unwarrantably introducing a model drawn from literature...to throw light on spontaneous social processes which are not authored or set in conventions, but arise from clashes of interest or incompatible social structural principles in the give and take of everyday life in a social group.” One might ask, from where else would one derive an explanation for such phenomena?

⁴² Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 84.

⁴³ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 150.

that such social constructions are the means of accomplishing clear goals, but the clarification of goals themselves is of concern here. For Social Gospelers, solidarity and a functioning direct democracy were ends in themselves. A theology of *communitas*, by definition, may have been too dynamic to take root amidst changes at the start of the 20th century. Even so, the plethora of distinct paradises advertised in commercial media since then have found competition with these musical, rather secular, “middlebrow” myths for alienated masses.

